



Columnist Robert De Andreis

Childhood sweethearts

When I came out as a teenager, I kept journals as a form of therapy. Two years ago, while I was home on disability and bored with my new retired life, I dragged those books out and began transcribing them. Because of my early efforts, I now have an accurate tool to track the distance of a life well traveled.

As I look back at my former self, I feel a sense of completion — all the pieces are finally in place, and my work on the planet is, I hope, over. I've told God many times that I don't want to come back again in another life. I pray that this incarnation is my last. But if you see, sometime in the next century, a crazy, homeless, 300-pound, toothless woman obsessed with turning over every *Sentinel* rack on Market Street, you'll know I still had lots more to learn. Give her some change, or an old crust of bread, but never tell her she was an attractive, sex-crazed columnist in a former life or she'll twist your arm off and eat it like a drumstick.

Do I really believe in successive advances of the soul through an endless series of incarnations until some sort of ultimate oneness with God is achieved? You'll have to figure that one out for yourself. It does seem rather theatrical — you know, all those different lifetime scenarios. Maybe it's a spiritual principle scripted by a frustrated psycho-drama queen, well past her existential prime hovering over the cosmos.

Growing up in this city exposed me to all kinds of unusual things. As a curious boy living on Russian Hill, I'd

hang out in North Beach and Grant Avenue, visiting head shops, bead stores and used bookstores with traces of the Beat Generation still on the shelves. Driving down Broadway was the only route to the Bay Bridge on our weekly Sunday drives. On that street, vulgar straight pornography was a tawdry part of the urban landscape. I'll never forget the sight of a topless go-go dancer in a cage above the street or a newly-erected Carol Doda sign with flashing red nipples. Explicit display window photos, with gold stars covering the key spots, proclaimed "He/She Nude Love Acts." Were those tacky, disgusting straight people trying to recruit me into their sad, desperate heterosexual lifestyle?

The PTA wanted to shut down a very discreet gay movie house near our school. I never knew it was there, but as soon as they mentioned it, I kept checking it out. The Castro at that time was just a sleepy Irish neighborhood. We'd pass it on Sunday drives through the Haight, where free love was flooding the streets and barefoot runaway flower kids were hitchhiking during the summer of love. This climate of free sex would lay the foundation for an ancient

people to finally burst out of hiding.

Even as a kid, I was a loner. When I was around 11 years old I would walk all over the city by myself, itching to be a grown-up so that I could finally smoke cigarettes on the street. At that time, San Francisco was a city in transition. Market Street was a huge mess for a decade as tracks were laid for the new mass transit. From my house, where we had a sweeping view of Telegraph Hill, the radical Transamerica pyramid suddenly took shape before our eyes, pointing toward the future. Street artists hawked crafts and street theater drew crowds in parks on sunny afternoons. But lurking in these crowds were shadows my father never warned me about.

Scary things happen to cute little boys walking alone in big cities, things that are easier for dads to warn their daughters about. I was stalked by older men in public libraries and toy stores. I found pornography in our neighborhood playground. I was solicited for child pornography and subsequently molested. I reluctantly rang the bachelor's doorbells on my drugstore delivery job, only to find them wearing less and less and ordering more and more. I hope they're all dead.

There was a fussy boutique on Polk Street near my grammar school. I'd save up my allowance and go into this store because they sold models I liked to make. Every month they would be moved to a different part shelf so that the creepy queen with the bad teeth would have to personally show me where they were. Finally he moved them to the bottom shelf near the cash register, so I had to get down on my knees to get them. As he stood over me, I noticed the cuffs of his pants bobbing up and down. I looked up and he was playing with himself. Did I lead him on? Was my Catholic school uniform too provocative?

Twenty years later, I walked into this same store out of curiosity. There he was, like an ancient castrato, with brittle dyed ringlets, pale face powder and the same bad, yellow teeth I could never forget. In an instant, my heart began thumping and my nostrils flared as an unspeakable rage flew over me. With a sweep of my arm, I wanted to clear his shelves of all the trembling crystal figurines. I wanted to scream, "I was only a kid, you ASSHOLE, what were you thinking?!" He wasn't thinking about me, that's for sure. **SFS**

Write me: Robert De Andreis
22 Clifford Ter. #4,
San Francisco, CA 94117.